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## COMMUNICATIONS

### PROFESSOR BARBOUR'S PAPER ON ENGLISH COMPOSITION IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

SINCE there was no opportunity given for the discussion of Professor Barbour's paper on "English Composition in the High School," when it was read at the state teachers' association, and since it has been given a wide circulation through the *SCHOOL REVIEW*, I wish to beg the indulgence of those interested in this subject, for a few moments.

Is it quite correct, pedagogically, to assume that because such geniuses as Renan, Brooks, Lowell, and the others mentioned, learned to write almost entirely without instruction, that the average high-school pupil needs little or no special instruction in English composition? If so, why not call over the roll of *uninstructed*, yet renowned mathematicians, and then conclude that we need give but little time to arithmetic and geometry? The same query might properly be made regarding great scientists, and the teaching of sciences. The fact is this: the man whose native ability and inner impulses urge him on to some great work in life, becomes his own teacher, besides making everything and everybody, his teacher as well. But the average person who is left to absorb his knowledge, or gain it in some semi-unconscious way, is quite likely to turn out an ignoramus. The English teacher could learn much more concerning his real task by studying the work of ten persons of fair ability and ordinary education, as to how they *did not* learn to write good English, than by the investigation mentioned in the paper. And these persons would not be hard to find. The teacher of English composition in the high school cares little how Shakespeares are made, but desires, rather, to learn how to give to ordinary boys and girls such a grasp of a few principles and methods of our language as will enable them to express themselves in a clear, logical, and proper manner.

The force of what the great masters say with reference to the "total culture of the mind," "commerce with the best literature," "converse with living men, face to face, and mind to mind," and all kindred thoughts is readily accepted by all English teachers. But this, though it may throw some light on the question, by no means solves the whole problem. In the face of the probable fact, that men have become great writers without a text-book or a teacher, there yet remains in the mind of the teacher a sort of instinctive notion that he has a right and a reason to exist. If this notion is not a misapprehension, then the earnest teacher of English composition would gladly know better the ground upon which he stands; on the other hand, if he has

been laboring under a delusion, and really is not needed at all, he would cheerfully be persuaded of this fact, and be allowed to "depart in peace."

But the paper goes on to say: "More and more, we believe, teachers will come to an agreement upon a few, plain, pedagogical principles." There is surely some ground for such a conviction. "'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished." But right here the paper is disappointing, in not sounding a clearer call to a unity so greatly desired. Where shall be the rallying ground? What may those "few, pedagogical principles" be? Is there need of a class or special instruction in order to implant these principles in the mind of the common student, or may he be left to absorb them unconsciously? These are some of the fundamental questions that need to be settled before we can have a center around which to group all of the many good suggestions contained in the paper.

But instead of an answer to these questions, or a discussion of them even, which at least one earnest seeker after truth waited for, the whole subject was thrown into a "maze of doubt and uncertainty" by the statement that, "Perhaps we should gain something by declaring that English composition is best taught *by not teaching it at all*, that is by not having any distinctive course to which pupils are sent to *learn composition*." Just what that "*something*" is, to be gained from such a declaration, is also not made clear; unless it be to give to the English teacher "that tired feeling" which makes him wonder whether, after all, life is really worth living."

If in the past this subject has been poorly taught, as it unquestionably has, it is high time that we get down to the root of the matter, and, if possible, find out what those special facts and principles are, that ought and must be looked after by the teacher of composition. And we shall not sooner do this by intimations that perhaps the whole subject may best be left to take care of itself, or the other suggestion, that it be sporadicated among all the teachers, and throughout the whole course.

The criticism made in the paper upon text-books of rhetoric are well merited; and most assuredly all such books, or at least those absurd parts of them, should be discarded. But this does not prove that there can be no proper book of instruction upon this subject, no book that will appeal to good taste and sound reason. We believe that at least an approximation to such a book has been made by Professor Scott, of our state university. But if he is not on the right track, the study should be kept up until the right track is found; or until we are convinced that there is *no* right track, and that the student would best be left to be molded by merely good English influences.

That there is something special and technical for the English composition teacher in the high school to do is my firm conviction. Just *what that is*, it is not the purpose of this discussion to state. It would hardly be becoming in me to attempt to do so. It is for the very purpose of calling forth this important piece of wisdom from some high source that I take up this discus-

sion. It was for some such ray of light that I have read and reread the paper.

Possibly it might be answered, that one of those brilliant, new methods that "alters the style of students in a few weeks," would probably suit me. No, it would not. I should take no more stock in such an answer to the great question than does the writer of the paper himself. His comment on such methods or upon such claims for any method suits me exactly.

As to the results to be achieved, the statement of the paper is easily accepted, viz.: "Every piece of English should be characterized by clearness, unity, and effectiveness; in sentence structure, paragraph structure, and in the structure of the composition as a whole." But *how* shall this be achieved? "Aye, there's the rub." Many good suggestions are offered concerning what good birth, good literature, good conversation, good corps of teachers, etc., will do; but will all of these combined and working harmoniously together produce the high quality of English called for in the above statement? With all of these good influences playing upon him, will the average student come to write such English *unconsciously*? Not one in a thousand.

That most people *do* write altogether too *unconsciously* is readily seen from an examination of their work. Even the paper under discussion may bear some evidence on this point. On page 505 he promises "to speak of the necessity that the entire corps of teachers interest themselves in getting good English writing," but drops the thought without elaboration. Two pages farther on it is taken up in the midst of another paragraph. Again, on page 505 he brings up the topic of "the influence of good reading upon the expression of thought." But this, too, is dropped for a discussion of text-books of rhetoric. Between this discussion of bad text-books and the work which should be done by each and all of the teachers, is sandwiched in about all that is said concerning the particular and special work of the class in composition. Here is at least a suggestion that there may be such a thing as too much *unconsciousness* in writing.

Is it not possible to so train our students in the elements of English composition that they may know *how* to say what they want to say, and know *when* they have said it?

To the writer of the paper every English teacher who has read it will feel a debt of gratitude for the many excellent things contained in it. But that it is not the last word upon this very important subject is clearly evident.

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